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ABSTRACT

Suggesting that the continuing rise in illiteracy is due to the decrease of simple forms of communication including conversation, stories, songs, and rhymes, this study investigated the possibility of reestablishing the connection between literacy and orality through education, especially with English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students and with developmentally impaired adults. A study explored the effectiveness of using storytelling in the forms of folktales, family stories, and personal experiences to facilitate literacy learning over a six-month period. In the first three months, a class of ESL students (all Chinese) was given assignments to tell personal experiences and family stories, usually about their mother country, in class. In the second three months, a reading class of developmentally impaired adults was instructed to tell fables. Results indicated that both groups: (1) gained confidence in speaking in a group; (2) attained greater mastery of the language; and (3) increased comprehension (exhibited by the stories retold), higher self-esteem, and more friendships through an increased ability to communicate personal values. (Contains 10 references.) (SC)

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STORYTELLING FOR LITERACY

Overview:

With illiteracy continuing to rise at an alarming rate innovative approaches to literacy training are needed to meet the increasing need. Barry Sanders, author of *A Is for Ox: The Collapse of Literacy and the Rise of Violence In An Electronic Age* (Vintage Books, 1994), suggests that the problem lies with the decrease in the simple forms of communication--conversation, stories, songs, rhymes--- and that literacy learning would be significantly improved if we "reestablish the connection between literacy and orality" (p. 12).

•What is orality?

Orality in its most literal sense refers to both listening and speaking. Further, Havelock Ellis (*The Muse Learns to Write*) calls orality "patterned communication" which can take the form of poems, songs, stories, rhymes, proverbs.

•Why is the spoken word (orality) essential to learning the written word (literacy)?

UN says there are three thousand languages spoken, seventy-eight have a literature, of those, five or six enjoy an international audience. This body of literature is relatively small, yet its effect is out of all proportion in the global scheme of things. Reading matters.

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In most every instance of an individual successfully learning to read there was language heard and spoken in the crucible of everyday conversation. I believe it is this early exposure to story, song and the give and take of conversation that predicts whether a child will be a successful reader. Most low reading or non reading adults lack experience with "patterned communication". Orality precedes literacy, says Barry Sanders (See Bibliography).

What is storytelling? And why is it a key to literacy

Storytelling is the use of voice and gesture to narrate a story. All true storytelling requires a teller and a listener. Storytelling is language in context. Even a cursory look at oral cultures past and present reveals stories as an central activity. As recently as thirty to fifty years ago it was common to tell (or read aloud) fairy tales, nursery rhymes, jokes, proverbial sayings in the United States. All these oral forms communicate values, truths, ideas, knowledge.

Today this "patterned communication" is far less common. In its place is television, CDs, video games --- all forms of scripted electronic information. Many children grow up without the natural rhythms of language that is beautiful and metaphoric. As a result they have fewer meaning making skills (cognition, interpretation) and fewer language skills (expression of ideas) to bring to the task of reading.

Adults who are low reading or non reading classically have not been "storied" as children. Those for whom English is a second language may have been storied in their first language but are not in their second. In each case what is missing is a deepening of their oral experiences. A "restorying" if you will.

What kind of stories and storytelling were used during the research period?

The research project explored the effectiveness of using storytelling to facilitate literacy learning. The research period extended over a six months period. The first three months were with ESL students (all Chinese). The second three months were with developmentally impaired adults in a reading class. The three types of storytelling used were folktales, family stories, and personal experience stories.

With the ESL students I worked closely with the tutor to tie storytelling to the existing instruction. A simple example of how this worked occurred when the students were studying idioms (*Everyday Idioms*). Instead of rote repetition of the sample sentences, I asked the students to give me a story of an event from their life in China (or elsewhere if they chose) using the idiom. The use of this approach was both therapeutic and diagnostic. The sharing of genuine communication (instead of the example in the text) using the newly gained language was pleasurable, increased their mastery and provided the tutor with a clear indication whether the student understood.

Another use of storytelling involved telling a story of something special that happened to them when they were young. Each student had a week to work on this. They easily thought of the story and then sought help for specific vocabulary words to convey concepts. The following week they shared their stories, which were charming and held our attention because they taught us much of what life was like for them in their mother country. New audiences were sought in the form of husbands and wives to come and listen. With each retelling mastery was greater and the use of descriptive detail increased.

With the second group of adults I was working with a different set of challenges. This group, because of their slight mental impairment had experienced a great deal of failure in their lives. When I began with personal experience stories they had their stories to tell--- many sad and filled with description of neglect and abuse. These stories, too, must be heard and trust is built in the hearing of them.

Later we began working with folk literature. I told them several different types of stories, just to get them used listening and imagining. Then I taught them to tell fables. Fables are an excellent place to begin because the narrative is so short and so few events and characters are present. After they were comfortable telling these, I proposed a puppet show for the pre-school children who were schooled in the same building. They were very enthusiastic. They puppet making, rehearsal and final program was successful.

What were the results?

In the both groups I saw greater confidence in speaking in a group, greater mastery of the language, and increased comprehension (exhibited by the stories retold). There was also the self-esteem and building of friendships through an increased ability to communicate personal values. The willingness to take risks was a delight to see since, especially with the second group, fear of failure is ever present.

One of the keys to gaining mastery is giving the person an opportunity to repeat the story in more than one setting or with a different audience. This allows the individual time to polish the story and grow comfortable with their new "patterned language".

How can someone include storytelling in their classes, programs or individual tutoring? To begin I suggest three things: 1) increase oral experiences in class. Read aloud, tell stories, read poems, share reminiscences. Do this with no agenda, such as writing down what was said in order to practice writing. Do it for the sheer enjoyment of language. 2) use one of the three forms of stories -- folktales, family stories, personal experiences --- and allow the students to tell them to each other in small groups. Next ask for volunteers to share in a larger group and last create new audiences to help the students gain mastery. 3) listen to what your students are telling you as to their interests in stories. Follow their lead and they will follow you.

Use of the above suggestions will lead your students in greater and greater literacy because they have a reason. The words they speak can inevitably become the words they will read and write.

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National Storytelling Association, 116 W. Main St., Jonesborough, TN 37659 or call (800) 5254514

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